

January 20, 2019

John 2: 1-11

Prayer: Dear Lord, Please go with us into the study of your Word. Make it live as vividly in our hearts today as when it was written. In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.

Fine Art, Fine Music, Fine Wine

If you have spent any time at Triune, you know how important our art room is to us. We use pieces every Sunday during worship. We have Sue Miller's exhibit of "Country Churches" coming up February 1 at a downtown gallery. We have our annual art auction coming up April 11 at the Hyatt.

If you have spent any time at Triune, you know how important our music is to us. From our professionally trained music team to opera singers to rockers to Elvis impersonators, we try to expose worshipers to all kinds of musical styles.

If you have spent any time at Triune, you know how important beauty and cleanliness is to us. We are big believers that gardens and fresh flowers and a beautiful safe environment are part of how we say, "You are a beloved child of God. "

These things don't replace the hard work of accessing addiction recovery or medical care or employment or housing. But they enhance those things. They are necessary to a holistic approach which we believe humans require.

Though I was the arts writer for *The Greenville News* for many years, I can't take credit for all the art that is here. I learned to appreciate the importance of the arts. But people in the community saw their openings and took them.

It all started when Karen Lucci came to us in 2008 and asked if she could bring art materials into the dining hall on Sunday afternoons. We said sure, and she set up on the dining room tables. Her husband, Phil, made wooden crosses in his shop, and people painted them. Karen might have two people on a Sunday or she might have 10.

They painted on the crosses and on plywood and on blocks of wood, and we began to hang their work in the dining hall.

A few months later, Karen asked if she could set up her operation in a more private room upstairs. We said sure, and gave her a huge corner room that looks out on Rutherford Street and Stone Avenue. She and her artist buddies painted the walls with colorful jungle flora, and moved their art supplies in.

They brought in music and a rocking chair and a coffee pot, and on Sunday afternoons and Wednesday mornings, you might find one person working quietly on a painting or you might find 15 people working on sculptures and drawings and carvings and collages and sewing projects.

The inventory began to grow and grow, and the artists overseeing the room taught themselves to mat and frame the work. They hung molding in the second-floor hallway for display. They gave me pieces for our Christmas cards and honor cards.

The artists soon realized that the church couldn't hold all the art work they generated. So they staged an art show in the dining hall in 2009.

The popularity of the show surprised us. It was supposed to start at 6:30 PM. But by 6 PM, people were streaming in.

By 7:30, the walls had been picked clean. People were lining up five and 10 deep at the table to pay. When someone paid for a painting but left it out on a table for other people to see, more people tried to buy it. We could have sold some pieces three or four times.

But Karen and the friends who help her run the Art Room weren't through. They began hosting tea parties before holidays. That has morphed into celebrating birthdays and holidays and just making the Art Room a truly fun place to be.

And now with the adoption of the annual art auction by a club of professional women, it has become a ritzy affair that draws attention to our artists from people way outside our circle.

One day I was explaining all this to a group who was touring the building. And a man said, "I don't quite understand why you are doing all this when people don't have food or jobs or homes."

I don't understand why you are doing all this when people don't have food or jobs or homes.

I wasn't offended. I might have once asked the same thing myself. But I have learned a lot as I have seen people's confidence grow and friendships emerge and sales flourish.

So I told the visitor, “I make no apologies for our Art Room. We are doing what we can with food and jobs and housing. But what goes on in this room touches people in ways our economic help cannot.”

In today’s Scripture passage, we are going to look at a well-known gospel story in the light of our Art Room, in the light of our music and Playback Café, in light of our purple sanctuary doors and fresh flowers.

The gospel writer John is as different from Matthew, Mark and Luke as it is possible to be. He tells different stories. He tells of Jesus speaking in long discourses rather than parables. He tells of a different time frame.

And he almost never writes on a single level.

If you’d like to read along with this unique author, please turn to **John 2: 1-11**.

On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding.

³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, ‘They have no wine.’ ⁴And Jesus said to her, ‘Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come.’

⁵His mother said to the servants, ‘Do whatever he tells you.’

⁶Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, 'Fill the jars with water.' And they filled them up to the brim.

⁸He said to them, 'Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward.' So they took it.

⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, 'Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now.'

¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

Now you might well ask, "What has this story got to do with the Art Room? Are you guys serving wine up there?"

Not yet. But the comparison I am making is to the bounty and joy we have in this picture of a plentiful flow of wine. According to John, it was not just any ol' wine, but a fine wine -- so fine that the wine steward was confused because it had not been served first.

This is an epiphany passage, and that's why the church has us read it on the second Sunday after the Epiphany. That means it's one of those passages – like the visit of the magi and the Holy Spirit's voice at Jesus's baptism – in which Jesus is recognized as divine.

John's entire gospel is built around seven miracles, or seven signs, performed by Jesus. This turning of water into wine is the first. It “**revealed his glory,**” we are told, “**and his disciples believed in him.**” Another epiphany. Aha!

But as we read this familiar story, there are two things we might not have noticed in years of looking at it. That's John for you.

First, this miracle, or sign, occurred on the third day of John's story about Jesus. The third day is no accident. It is a reference, a foreshadowing of the resurrection.

This is a story of happiness, of grace, of abundance. And in John's telling, it happened on the third day. It can be read as a precursor to the resurrection.

Actually, it's a funny story. Jesus and the disciples and his mom are at a wedding in Cana, which is a small town in the middle of Galilee. The hosts run out of wine, and Jesus' mother tells him, “**They have no wine.**”

He responds that it's not their problem. And she totally, totally ignores him. She acts as if he hasn't said anything at all, and instead turns to the servants and says, “**Do whatever he tells you.**”

Can't you just see Jesus, standing behind her back as she directs the servants, going, *What did I just say?*

If God wanted to come to earth in human form, he was going to get a taste of a Jewish mother.

As the mother of a 33-year-old son myself, I think I understand a little of what Mary felt. Whenever I spend time with Taylor, I hear myself ask, “What is your problem?”

But the truth is, I think he hung the moon. Mary thinks her son could turn water into wine. And she doesn't really care if he wants to.

Here's the second part of the story that I didn't grasp for many years. Jesus told the servants to fill six stone jars with water.

But these weren't jars to drink from. They were jars for the Jewish rites of purification. In other words, they were for hand washing. The water in them was not for drinking but for washing, for cleansing.

That's the water Jesus turned to wine. One commentator says it would be like filling our squirt hand sanitizers with fine wine.

What Jesus did was to take a vessel of the old Jewish law ... and make it a vessel for free-flowing wine. What symbolism!

Remember how often in the gospels Jesus deliberately breaks the laws of ritual cleanliness. He touches lepers and eats with tax collectors. He allows bleeding women and prostitutes to touch him.

And in this early, early story in John's gospel, he turns the water that's supposed to be used for hand washing into a fine wine that is one of the joys of our fleshly, human lives.

This a picture of extravagance. This is a picture of grace, not unlike the one that Luke paints when he tells of the woman who broke a jar of perfume over Jesus' feet.

There is a time for saving. And there is a time for exuberant, generous extravagance.

There is a time for feeding and finding jobs and locating housing. And there is a time for art and music, for gardening and theater. There is a time for friendship, for enjoying each other's company.

I preached last week at a church in Seneca. In February and March, I'll be speaking at churches in North Carolina and Charleston. People in these areas want to hear how we created our church model, how we combine limited relief ... and social work, community ... and worship, art ... and friendship.

And I will have to admit that we stumbled onto much of it. Many of you have heard me explain how we began inviting people to volunteer, to belong. It is central, I believe, to our lives together. This will be a repetition for many of you, but I think it's worth repeating.

Shortly after I came here, Alfred Johnson came to work for us. Alfred was an ordained Baptist minister but he also worked as our facilities manager.

Before long, I began noticing that he had lots of people who came to eat here working with him around the church. They were carrying out trash and sweeping and mopping and making tea and unloading groceries, even on weekdays.

And I thought, "Shouldn't they be trying to find paying jobs?"

I really didn't know what to make of it.

And then Elaine Nocks, who preached last week, gave me a book called *Take This Bread*. Like John's gospel, Sara Miles' book is many-layered.

Sara was an atheist who lived in San Francisco. She became a Christian at an Episcopal church that practiced open communion on a table in the church's entrance. The idea was you might find Jesus for the first time at the communion table, before you were a practicing church member.

Well, Sara was so taken with this idea of meeting Jesus in the bread and the wine that she wanted to open a food pantry. She and her church volunteers opened a weekly food pantry on the church's communion table.

The people who came were homeless, mentally ill, recent immigrants, veterans. And after a few months, some of them began showing up early not just to get food, but to help give it out.

And I read that and thought, "Yes, I get that. They want to be part of your community."

And then it hit me. That was exactly what was happening at Triune, and I hadn't seen it. People were volunteering with Alfred because they wanted to be community. It was right under my nose, and I didn't see it.

After that awakening, our inclusion of volunteers became more intentional. It is a good thing to offer food and help with jobs and housing. But it is a better thing to offer inclusive community, friendship, welcome. It is a better thing to offer a place to worship, a place to create, a place to belong.

Mary and Jesus might have been squabbling a little at this wedding in Cana, but they saw the value of opening wide the wine spigot at their friends' wedding.

In the same way, we see art and beauty and community as balm for our souls.

To some people, those things may appear extravagant and excessive in the face of the overwhelming needs that come into this place.

But I hope to most, they look like God's grace.

Amen.